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ABSTRACT

"Battlestar Galactica," ABC-TV's prime-time science fiction series for 1978-79, illustrates how popular, mass media entertainment can communicate contradictory meanings that correlate with unresolved cultural tensions. The ambiguity of visual design is especially confusing because it is contrapuntal to the simplicity and clarity of the formulaic storyline. The use of circular and triangular motifs in all the battleships does not conform to the clearcut polarities present in the storyline, in which the antinomies of freedom/order and human/machine are isomorphic with good/evil. The visual design works only to obscure these dichotomies. The confusion can be interpreted as signifying anxieties, problematic to human culture, concerning ambivalent values in an increasingly technological world. "Battlestar Galactica" typifies the tendency of popular culture artifacts to communicate unresolved dilemmas. (Ten notes and four figures are included.) (RS)

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# Ambiguity of Visual Design and Meaning in TV's *Battlestar Galactica*

by Lane Roth

*Battlestar Galactica*, ABC-TV's prime-time science fiction series for 1978-79, illustrates how popular, mass-mediated entertainment can communicate contradictory meanings that correlate with unresolved cultural tensions. The weekly series' initial episode was a three-hour, filmed pilot, broadcast on Sunday, 17 September 1978, and viewed, at least in part, by an estimated 42 percent of American homes using television at the time.[1] Reportedly the program had an unprecidently high budget,[2] much of which was spent on sets and other physical properties, traditionally the costliest production items. Advance publicity, clearly intending to promote the premiere as a mass media "event," emphasized the expense and effort involved in designing the elaborate full-scale sets and scale models of the spaceships.[3] Despite this extensive preparation, the visual design of the finished production looks incoherent.

Ambiguity of design in *Battlestar Galactica* is especially confusing because it is contrapuntal to the simplicity and clarity of the formulaic storyline. *Battlestar Galactica*'s narrative primarily concerns epic conflict and quest. In accordance with the science fiction paradigm, the locus of conflict is outer space, and the combatants are a race of humans, defended by stalwart "Warriors," pitted against a race of evil, mechanical warriors called "Cylons." The quest is undertaken by a "ragtag fugitive fleet" of sundry spaceships led by

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a sole surviving warship named *Galactica*. The clearcut conflict between man and machine, which is assigned moral coordinates of good vs. evil in the storyline, lacks correlative signifiers in *Battlestar Galactica*'s visual design. Basic shapes, particularly the circle and the triangle, recur throughout the text without systematic correspondence to either human "good guys" or mechanical "bad guys." Nowhere is this ambiguity so conspicuous as in the spaceships, the most intricate sets and models, which function significantly in the narrative as means of life support, transportation and combat. The Battlestar *Galactica* additionally gives the show its name.

The interiors of the *Galactica* and the enemy Cylon Base Ships are similarly sterile, hermetically sealed habitats. Only one set is seen for the Cylon interiors, presumably for the command ship. This is a capacious chamber occupied only by the Imperious Leader, a mysterious, cloaked figure whose features are concealed by camera angles and low-key lighting. He sits immobile atop a tall, unadorned pedestal, from which he dispenses orders to visiting Cylon Centurions. The composition consists of primarily circular and triangular shapes (Fig. 1),[4] which unify the *mise-en-scene*. The room itself appears to be circle shaped. The circular source of ceiling light at the top of the frame is repeated by the circular pool of light it casts on the floor. The illuminated areas are asymmetrical but balanced, as the smaller but more intense light source is opposed by the larger but more diffuse light pool near the frame bottom. Between the two lit circles is the Imperious Leader's cylindrical pedestal, which reiterates the circular motif. These areas are positioned so that the

circumferences of the circles are exactly aligned left of frame center. Necessarily the larger circumference of the bottom circle extends much farther toward frame right. This line suggests the base of a triangle. The exaggerated height of the pedestal forms a vertical line that conjoins the upper and lower lit areas, and forms a right angle with the diameter of the larger pool of light at frame bottom. The hypotenuse of this right triangle, an imaginary line extending from the right edge of the top circle to the right edge of the bottom circle, is reinforced by the blocking of the figures in the frame. The Imperious Leader sits directly underneath the ceiling light, toward frame left, while far below him the Cylon Centurion stands in the center of the light pool, toward frame right.

The *Galactica* set corresponding to the Imperious Leader's chamber is the ship's bridge (Fig. 2). The walls, the multilevel tiers, the railings and the control boards all form concentric circles. The leader of the humans, Commander Adama, occupies a central position of the highest platform.

The exterior design of the Battlestar *Galactica* evades classification by discrete geometric shapes, but a formal view describes a triangular formation of a central hull and two hangar hulls which hang down from either side (Fig. 3). The Cylon counterpart is a combination of triangular and circular shapes. Viewed from any side angle, the Cylon Base Ship is a configuration of four inverted triangles. Seen from above or below, the Cylon Base Ship is circular, but is sectioned into triangular wedges.

Both the Battlestar *Galactica* and the Cylon Base Ships are fortresses, but are similar to today's naval aircraft carriers in that their striking power comes

from the smaller, speedier, more maneuverable fighters that they launch. Launching apparatus, never shown on the Cylon Base Ships, is seen repeatedly on the *Galactica*. A tubular catapult, its interior is a circumscribed triangle (Fig. 4).

The Cylon fights are all identical, congruent with the storyline image of their pilots as mechanical stereotypes. But equally homogeneous are the *Galactica*'s fighters, generically designated "Vipers." Neither fleet individuates its units by squadron, rank or personal markings. Although the Cylon fighters are shaped and colored differently from the Vipers, they do share similar elements of design. The Viper's frontal outline is triangular, because of its equidistantly placed, triform fins. Each fin is connected to the rocket's body tube via a cycloid engine. A rear view of the Viper displays clearly this combination of circles and triangles. Seen from above, or in profile, the Viper's shape suggests a triangle, because of the aft location of the three fins, with their large surface area compared to the slim forward end of the body tube. The Cylon fighter appears circular from above, like a flying saucer, and this motif is restated in the twin circular engine exhausts visible from the rear. At the same time the saucer's convexo-concave configuration, obvious from a frontal view, suggests a triangle.

The composition of multiship shots tends to use triangular motifs. Cylon fighters, for example, fly toward the camera in triangular formation. An action shot of a Viper pursuing and firing on a Cylon, both ships facing toward camera, also forms a large triangle. The triangular Viper, above and behind the

Cylon ship, represents the apex of the triangle; the triangular Cylon fighter, larger in the frame foreground, represents the base; the sides of the triangle are formed by the diverging laser beams extending from the Viper to the Cylon ship.

Interior views of the Cylon fighters are usually composed as triangular three-shots; one crew member as apex, is seated above and behind two crew members seated in the foreground and to frame left and frame right below. No other framing devices are present to compete with this composition. Vipers are manned by single pilots who are shown typically framed, unlike the Cylons, behind triangular cockpit braces dotted with circular rivets. No onboard instrumentation is shown for any of the fighters, except for the Viper's control stick. Usually seen in closeup shots, it is a combination of triangular and circular shapes.

The use of visual motifs betrays similarities between human and mechanical foes in *Battlestar Galactica*. These similarities, although contrary to the storyline, can be seen in the program's subtext. The humans (whose leader is appropriately named Adama) and the Cylons embody the myth of the American Adam. As described by John R. Cashill, the Adamic man is delineated by "absolute rootlessness and . . . lack of moral dilemma,"[5] and affinity for male companionship. The Battlestar *Galactica* is nomadic because the twelve known human planetary colonies have been annihilated by a Cylon sneak attack. Dialogue implies that the Cylons have home planets, but all we see are the three Base Ships, so that the Cylons appear to be as rootless as the humans. The humans live under martial law enforced by a male Warrior

class. Cylons, identical robots with mechanically monotonal auditory outputs (but the featureless Imperious Leader speaks clearly in a male human voice), denote masculine gender through physical bulk and bass vocal pitch. Depicted always bearing arms or piloting fighters, they all seem to be warriors, an impression reinforced by their title "Centurion." The "lack of moral dilemma" that identifies the American Adam characterizes the humans and Cylons, who both perceive the cosmos with clearly delimited values.

Humans as well as Cylons emblematize another American myth, that of Manifest Destiny. Humans are referred to as "Colonials," and their planetary settlements as "colonies." The more malevolent aspect of imperialistic expansion is represented by the Cylons, whose "standing order" is "extermination" of all humans.

Both humans and Cylons represent the dialectic of community vs. isolation. Adama is surrounded by many people on the *Galactica* bridge (Fig. 2), while the Imperious Leader isolates himself from his subordinates (Fig. 1). These coordinates are reversed in the fighters, because the Vipers are flown solo, whereas the Cylon ships are operated by troika.

In the *Battlestar Galactica* pilot, the vacuum of space is trafficked exclusively by humans and Cylons. The depiction of the universe as battleground for two opposing forces elevates their struggle to an eschatological dimension. The motivation for this struggle is explained by Commander Adama early in the program: "[The Cylons] hate us with every fiber of their existence. We love freedom, we love independence. . . . But to them it's an alien way of

existing. They will never accept it." Yet this verbalized antinomy is contradicted by the image track. We see that both humans and Cylons are contained and constrained by their home ships and fighters. Irrespective if ideology, both combatants must similarly insulate themselves from nature and depend upon technology to survive. We are shown that freedom must be sacrificed, to some extent, for order. The observed reciprocities in ordering patterns adapted by both the humans and their enemies imply a common structuring of consciousness.

The Cylons can be best understood by *doppelgängers* of humans, and the real struggle in *Battlestar Galactica* takes place in inner, not outer, space. In Jungian terms, the human/Cylon opposition represents a "dissociation of the ego."[6] The Cylons are only a hypostatization of man's tendency to rely on tools and weapons, now exteriorized to defend the ego against associated anxiety. "Good" technology remains with the human characters, while "bad" technology is projected outward to imaginary, mechanical monsters. Denial and projection of guilt and evil typify a pattern detected in American films by Wolfenstein and Leites.[7] Although science fiction films were not included in their study, *Battlestar Galactica* conforms to the same pattern.

The theme of conflict and dissociation in *Battlestar Galactica* is the counterpart to the theme of the quest, which represents the archetypal voyage of self-discovery. It is no coincidence that the voiceover in *Battlestar Galactica*'s epilog announces that the objective of the "lonely quest" is the planet Earth. An attempt at psychic integration of the ego is seen in *Battlestar Galactica*'s

recurring combinations of triangle and circles. According to Aniela Jaffé the archetypal image of the Self is the circle, particularly an ancient and enduring symbol called the *yantra* appears in *Battlestar Galactica* in the shoulder patch insignia worn by the Colonial Warriors, while an alternate version is seen in the overhead view of the Cylon Base Ship. A universal symbol expressing "the union of opposites,"[9] therefore, is associated with the very small and the very large, and with the humans as well as their psychic doubles.

In a semiological approach to myth, Roland Barthes has distinguished between first-order and second-order signs.[10] First-order signs denote specific meaning, wherein storyline concepts (the signified) are actualized by moving photographic images (signifiers). Second-order sign, which constitute myth, connote broader cultural meanings: the completed first-order sign becomes itself a signifier in a new system in which the signified concept is ideology. Analysis of frames from *Battlestar Galactica* has indicated a lack of coherency in the design of spaceships. At the first order of signification, the use of triangular and circular motifs as visual signifiers does not conform to the clearcut polarities presented by the signified storyline, in which the antinomies of freedom/order and human/machine are isomorphic with good/evil. The visual design works only to obscure these dichotomies. At the second order of signification, or myth, this confusion can be interpreted as signifying anxieties problematic to our culture. Our values about freedom/order and man/machine are necessarily ambivalent to an increasingly technologized world. *Battlestar Galactica* typifies the tendency of popular cultural artifacts to communicate unresolved dilemmas

of our time.

**Notes**

1. *Broadcasting*, 2 Oct. 1978, p. 52, col. 2.
2. *Broadcasting*, 4 Sept. 1978, p. 22, col. 3. Note that this issue of the weekly trade magazine pre-dated *Galactica*'s premiere. Advance news of a big-budget production often has "agenda-setting" or status-conferring functions beyond the manifest reportorial function.
3. "A 'City' Will Hurtle Through Space When 'Battlestar Galactica' Premieres with a Special Three-Hour Episode, Sunday, Sept. 17," ABC Press Relations *Feature*, 8 Aug. 1978; "'Battlestar Galactica' Will Feature 'Magic' Video Techniques." ABC Press Relations *Feature*, 29 Aug. 1978.
4. Original illustrations by Michael Kirkpatrick.
5. John R. Cashill, "Packaging Pop Mythology," in *The New Language: A Rhetorical Approach to the Mass Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lynn M. Berk (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 84. Cashill is probably referring to R. W. B. Lewis' *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955).
6. Carl G. Jung, "Approaching the Unconscious," in his *Man and His Symbols* (London, 1964; rpt. New York: Laurel-Dell, 1968), p. 7.
7. Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (1950; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1970).

8. Aniela Jaffé, "Symbolism in the Visual Arts," in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung, pp. 266-68.

9. Jaffe, p. 267.

10. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 114.

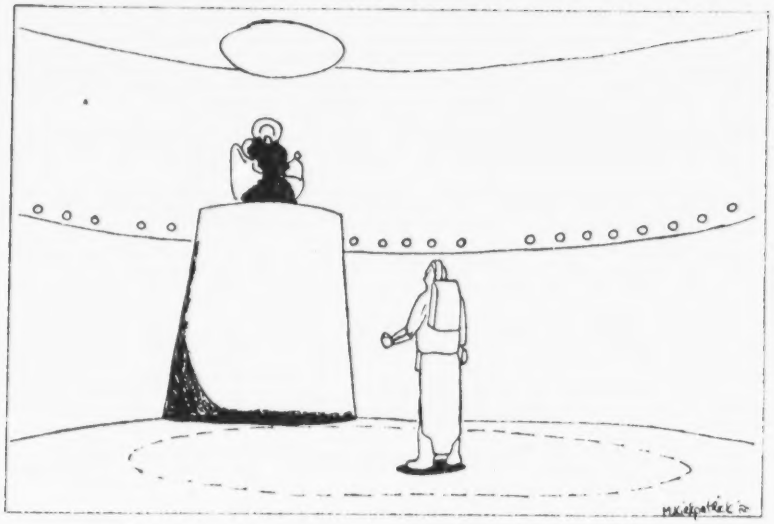

Fig. 1. Interior of Cylon Base Ship

Fig. 2. Bridge of *Galactica*

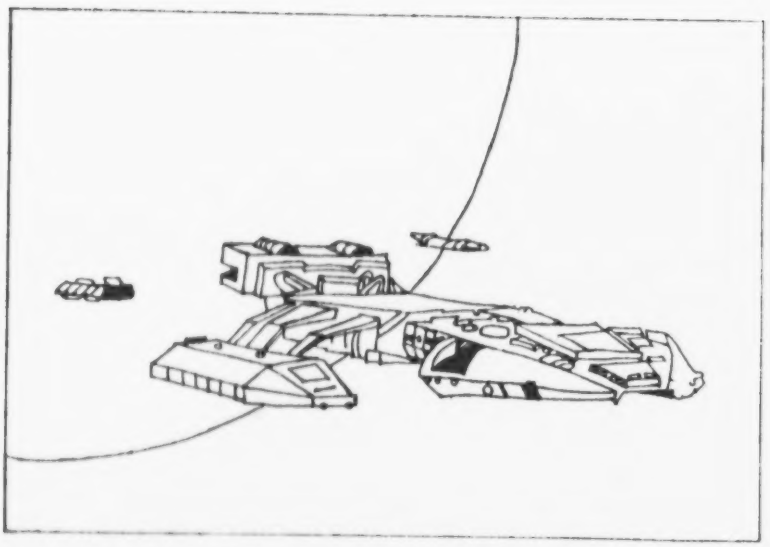

Fig. 3. Exterior of *Galactica*

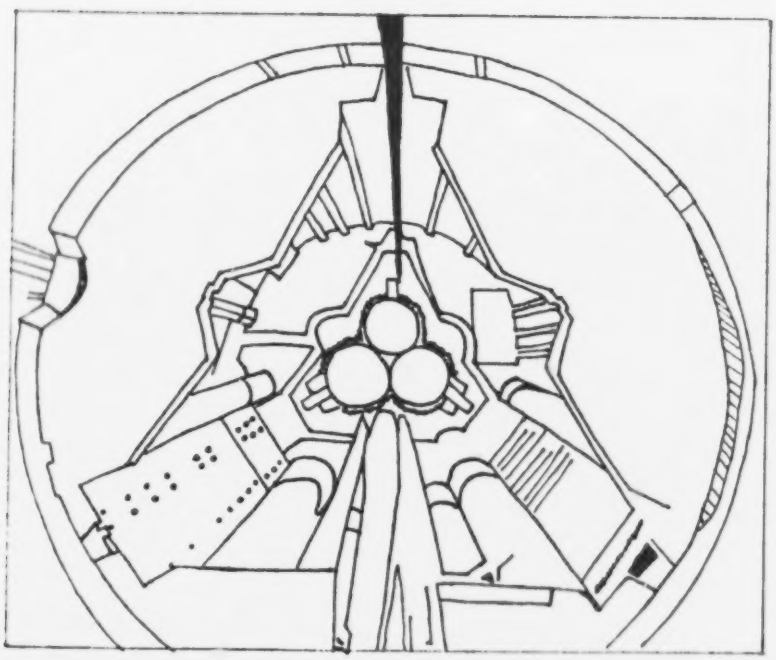

Fig. 4. Launching apparatus of *Galactica*